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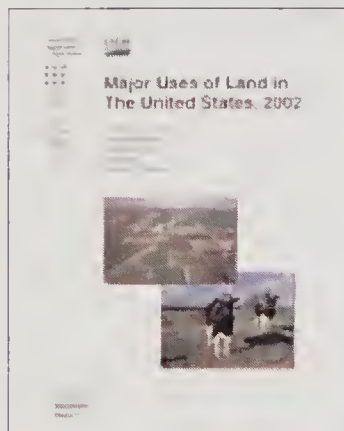
ERS Report Summary

Resources and Environment

Economic Research Service

May 2006

U.S. Department of Agriculture



This is a summary
of an ERS report.

Find the full report at

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Major Uses of Land in the United States, 2002

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The ERS *Major Land Uses* (MLU) series is the only accounting of all major uses of land, both public and private, in all 50 States. A consistent series of estimates by State was started in 1945, and has since been published at roughly 5-year intervals coinciding with the Censuses of Agriculture. National-level cropland estimates have been reported annually since 1910.

What Is the Issue?

Land-use changes have important economic and environmental implications for commodity production and trade, open space, soil and water conservation, and other policy issues. A first step in the study of land-use change is developing statistics on land use over time. This publication presents the results of the latest inventory (2002) of U.S. major land uses.

What Did the Study Find?

The most consistent trends in major uses of land (1945-2002) have been a growth in special-use and urban areas and a decline in total grazing lands. Forest-use land has generally declined since the 1940s, but increased 2 percent from 1997 to 2002. Total cropland area dipped about 2 percent from 1945 to 2002, but has cycled upwards and downwards twice over this period. Between 1997 and 2002, total cropland area reached a new 57-year low, continuing a downward trend since 1978.

Land area. The United States' land area totals nearly 2.3 billion acres. Land used for all agricultural purposes accounted for 52 percent of total U.S. land, while total grazing area (grassland pasture and range, cropland pasture, and grazed forests) comprised 35 percent of the total and two-thirds of all agricultural land. Major land uses in 2002 were forest-use land, 651 million acres (28.8 percent of the total); grassland pasture and range, 587 million acres (25.9 percent); cropland, 442 million acres (19.5 percent); special uses, 297 million acres (13.1 percent); miscellaneous other uses, 228 million acres (10.1 percent); and urban land, 60 million (2.6 percent). Within the nonurban land-use categories, about 94 million acres (4.2 percent of total U.S. land) was estimated to be rural residential area.

Cropland. Total cropland includes land planted for crops, cropland used for pasture, and cropland idled, including acreage removed from production under government programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program. Total cropland increased in the late 1940s, declined from 1949 to 1964, increased from 1964 to 1978, and decreased again (about 6 percent) from 1978 to 2002. Between 1997 and 2002, total cropland decreased by 14 million acres (3 percent) to its lowest level since 1945.

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Grassland pasture and range. Estimated acreage of grassland pasture and range increased by almost 7 million acres (1 percent) from 1997 to 2002. However, total grazing land acreage (grassland pasture and range, cropland pasture, and grazed forests) decreased from 1997 to 2002, continuing a decline since the 1940s.

Forest-use land. Forest-use land includes 134 million acres of grazed forests, but excludes 98 million forest acres that were estimated to be in parks, wildlife areas, and other special uses in 2002. Forest-use land increased 10 million acres (2 percent) from 1997 to 2002, reversing a downward trend since the 1940s. The 14-percent decline in forest-use land between 1949 and 2002 was largely due to reclassification of forested land from forest-use to special-use areas.

Urban and rural residential areas. Urban land area quadrupled from 1945 to 2002, increasing at about twice the rate of population growth over this period. After adjusting earlier estimates for new criteria used in the 2000 Census, urban area increased by 13 percent between 1990 and 2002. Census estimates based on the previous criteria indicate that urban area increased 9 million acres (18 percent) over the 1980s, 13 million acres (37 percent) over the 1970s, and 9 million acres (36 percent) over the 1960s. Estimated acreage of rural land used for residential purposes increased by 21 million acres (29 percent) from 1997 to 2002, and by 17 million acres (30 percent) from 1980 to 1997.

Special uses. Special-use areas (rural transportation uses, national and State parks, wilderness and wildlife areas, national defense and industrial areas, and farmsteads and farm roads) increased 11 million acres (4 percent) from 1997 to 2002. Special-use land has more than doubled in the 48 contiguous States from 100 million acres in 1945 to 212 million acres in 2002. Some of the estimated rise in special-use areas from 1997 to 2002 was driven by improved data, leading to a reclassification of miscellaneous and other land, which declined by 7 million acres (3 percent) over this period.

Regional patterns. Regional land-use patterns vary with differences in soil, climate, topography, and population. Stable patterns of land use at the national level can obscure larger changes in land use at regional and State levels. While cropland used for crops increased just 5 million acres (1 percent) nationally from 1964 to 2002, cropland used for crops in the Northeast, Southeast, Northern and Southern Plains, Mountain, and Pacific regions declined by 12 million acres (6 percent). It increased 17 million acres (13 percent) in the remaining regions.

Ownership. Over 60 percent (1,378 million acres) of U.S. land is privately owned. The Federal Government owns nearly 28 percent (635 million acres), over a third of which is in Alaska. State and local governments own about 9 percent (195 million acres). Over 2 percent (56 million acres) is in trust by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. There were no major changes in these aggregate ownership patterns from 1997 to 2002.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau, public land management agencies, and other sources were assembled and synthesized by State to calculate the use of several broad classes and subclasses of agricultural and nonagricultural land in 2002. A standardized set of procedures was used to maintain comparability with earlier estimates.

